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SUBJECT: Opposition and Police Face Off at Peaceful Rally

Ref: Minsk 223

¶1. Summary: On March 2 at 1800 opposition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich held an election rally in downtown Minsk. The rally attracted an estimated 3,000 participants. Although the event was peaceful and there were no arrests, security services prevented anyone from entering the square where the rally was to have taken place, and hundreds of riot police later prevented the crowd from marching to their backup location. Authorities, including the Central Election Commission (CEC), had stated this rally was illegal and could result in Milinkevich losing his right to be a candidate, although no announcement has been made on this yet. End summary.

¶2. Opposition candidate Milinkevich held a campaign rally in Freedom Square in Minsk at 1800 on March 2. Before the event the authorities, including the CEC, announced this rally would be considered an illegal mass gathering which could disqualify Milinkevich as a presidential candidate. Security forces began to cordon off the square and take positions throughout the area by 0900 that day. [Note: Another reason for the early security presence was that President Lukashenko addressed the All Belarusian Congress, located a block away, that afternoon.] Around 0900 security forces detained 15 to 30 (accounts differ) supporters of opposition candidate Aleksandr Kozulin in the square. Security forces then blocked all accesses to the square with metal fencing.

¶3. Poloff arrived at the square at 1730. Plainclothes security forces were calmly preventing anyone from entering the square and a neighboring street, but did allow people to gather on the sidewalk. Plainclothes officers videotaped everyone gathering by the square. Over the next hour the crowd grew to an estimated 3,000 people. [Note: ODIHR observers guessed the crowds size to be 5,000, while Milinkevich's deputy campaign manager claimed 10,000.] Not allowed into the square, the crowd stretched along both sides of Lenin Street. Authorities announced once over a loudspeaker that the rally was illegal and the crowd should disperse, and several times asked the crowd to stay out of the street for their own safety. The crowd was calm. A few demonstrators raised nationalist flags, blue denim emblems and Milinkevich banners, and at times they chanted, "Milinkevich" and "Zhive [Long live] Belarus." Police simply observed.

¶4. At about 1830 the crowd started to walk down Lenin Street. A Belarusian Popular Front deputy told Poloff they were headed to the backup rally point at the Palace of Sports. The crowd walked about two blocks before being stopped by a double line of police in full riot gear stretched across the road from building to building. Police formed a phalanx with their shields, and the crowd did not try to push past. SOBR (riot police) commander Colonel Dmitry Pavlichenko was standing in front of the line. Milinkevich briefly confronted Pavlichenko before leading the crowd into a nearby open area. [Note: photos of the police response can be found at <http://www.charter97.org/rus/news/2006/03/02/> rep. Earlier in the

day Pavlichenko had personally assaulted Kozulin; reftel.]

15. Riot police quickly ran in and surrounded about 1,000 members of the assembly, but appeared to take no further action. Milinkevich and others briefly addressed the rally before departing by cab. Police allowed the crowd to peacefully disperse.

16. Aleksey Janukevich, an organizer of the event for Milinkevich, told Poloff on March 3 that Milinkevich's team considers the rally to have been a success. They are very pleased at the large turnout (Janukevich estimated a little over 5,000 people), and that all proceeded without any police provocations. Janukevich had no reports of any violence or arrests. He added that Milinkevich is starting another swing the regions on March 3 to build on this momentum.

17. Comment: This event can be seen as a victory for both sides. The authorities showed that they can prevent the opposition from holding a rally on their terms, without resorting to violence or arrests that would lead to international condemnation. The opposition showed it can mobilize a crowd (the largest demonstration in Belarus in several years) without repercussions for the participants. If Milinkevich attempted another such rally before the elections, he probably would be able to attract more supporters.

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